portion 1406 which connects to an enlarged straight section 1408. Straight section 1408 is offset with respect to the center of neck portion 1406, so that one side of the straight section 1408 is flush with a side of the neck portion 1406, and an opposite side of the straight section 1408 is offset from and undercuts the side of the neck portion 1406, thereby forming a ledge 1414. Following the straight section 1408, a sloped portion 1410 is provided on a side of the stripper cavity 1402 opposite the ledge 1414. Sloped portion 1410 tapers inwardly toward a bottom opening 1412.

As an aspirator tube 860 with a tiplet 170 on its end is moved toward the stripper cavity 1402, the frusto-conical portion 1404 directs the tiplet 170 and tube 860 toward the neck portion 1406. The aspirator tube 860 continues to descend, and the tiplet 170 enters the straight section 1408 as the rim 177 of the tiplet 170 clears the bottom of the frusto-conical portion 1404 and passes through the neck portion 1406.

If the aspirator tube 860 and the stripper cavity 1402 are in proper, preferred alignment, a portion of the rim 177 of the tiplet 170 will be disposed below the ledge 1414 of the stripper cavity 1402 when the tiplet 170 has moved through the neck portion 1406 and into the straight section 1408. To ensure that a portion of the rim 177 will be disposed beneath the ledge 1414, the tiplet 170 engages the lower sloped portion 1410 as the aspirator tube 860 descends further to urge the aspirator tube laterally to direct the tiplet 170 below the ledge 1414.

The annular shoulder 857 (see FIGURE 25A) formed at the bottom of the aspirator tube 860 ensures that the tube 860 is not forced further into the through hole 180 of the tiplet 170 as the tube 860 is lowered into the stripper cavity 1402. The aspirator tube 860 then ascends, and the ledge 1414 catches the rim 177 and strips the tiplet 170 off the tube 860. The stripped tiplet 170 falls through bottom opening 1412 and into the waist bin 1134 in the lower chassis 1100 (see FIGURE 52).

With each of the stripper plates described above, the position of the tiplet-stripping elements are not all the same. For example, the ledges 1414 of the stripper cavities 1402 of the stripper plate 1400 are not at the same height throughout all the cavities. Preferably, three tiplet-stripping elements are at one height, and two tiplet-stripping elements are at a slightly different height above or below the other three elements. The result of the offset tiplet-stripping elements is that the static friction of the tiplet 170 on the end of the aspirator tube 860 need not be overcome, or broken, for all five tubes 860 at once. As the aspirator tubes 860 begin to ascend, static friction of the tiplets 170 is broken for one set (two or three) of aspirator tubes 860 first,

and then, as the tubes 860 continue to ascend, static friction of the tiplets 170 is broken for the remaining tubes 860. By not breaking static friction of the tiplets 170 for all five aspirator tubes 860 at once, the loads to which the tube holder 862, drive screw 866, threaded sleeve 863, and lift motor 868 are subjected are kept to a lower level.

ORBITAL MIXERS

The left orbital mixer 552 (and the right orbital mixer 550), as shown in FIGURES 32-34, are constructed and operate in the same manner as the lower housing section 803 and the orbital mixer assembly 828 of the magnetic separation wash stations 800 described above. Specifically, the orbital mixer 550 (552) includes a housing 554, including a front plate 551, a back plate 559, and mounting flanges 555, 556, for mounting the orbital mixer 550 (552) to the datum plate 82. An insert opening 557 is formed in a front edge of the housing 554. An MTU carrier 558 has a fork plate 560 attached to the bottom thereof and an MTU-retaining clip 562 attached to a back portion of the carrier 558 with opposed prongs of the clip 562 extending into an inner cavity of the carrier 558 that accommodates the MTU. An orbital mixer assembly 564 includes a drive motor 566 mounted to a motor mounting plate 567, a drive wheel 568 having an eccentric pin 570, an idler wheel 572 having an eccentric pin 573, and a belt 574. Drive motor 566 is preferably a stepper motor, and most preferably a VEXTA, model number PK245-02A, available from Oriental Motors Ltd. of Tokyo, Japan. Belt 574 is preferably a timing belt, model number A 6G16-170012, available from SDP/SI of New Hyde Park, New York. The orbital mixer assembly 564 is coupled to the MTU carrier 558 through the eccentric pins 570, 573 to move the MTU carrier 558 in an orbital path to agitate the contents of the MTU. The drive wheel 568 includes a locator plate 576, which, in conjunction with sensor 578 attached to sensor mounting bracket 579, verifies the proper positioning of the MTU carrier 558 for inserting an MTU 160 into the orbital mixer 552 (550) and retrieving an MTU 160 from the orbital mixer. Sensor 578 is preferably an Optek Technology, Inc., model number OPB980T11, sensor, available from Optek Technology, Inc. of Carrollton, Texas.

A top plate 580 is attached atop housing 554. Top plate 580 of the left orbital mixer 552 includes a number of tube fittings 582, preferably five, to which are coupled a like number of flexible delivery tubes (not shown) for delivering a fluid from a bulk fluid container to an MTU 160 located within the mixer via dispenser nozzles 583. Top plate 580 also includes a plurality

of pipette openings 581, corresponding in number to the number of individual receptacle vessels 162 comprising a single MTU 160, which is preferably five.

With the MTU 160 held stationary in the left orbital mixer 552, pipette unit 480 of the left pipette assembly 470 transfers a prescribed volume of amplification reagent from a container within the reagent cooling bay 900 into each receptacle vessel 162 of the MTU 160 through the pipette openings 581. The amplification reagent used will depend upon the amplification procedure being followed. Various amplification procedures are well known to those skilled in the art of nucleic acid-based diagnostic testing, a number of which are discussed in the background section above.

Next, the contents of the MTU are mixed by the orbital mixer assembly 564 of the orbital mixer 552 to ensure proper exposure of the target nucleic acid to amplification reagent. For a desired amplification procedure, those skilled in the art of nucleic acid-based diagnostic testing will be able to determine the appropriate components and amounts of an amplification reagent, as well as mix frequencies and durations.

After pipetting amplification reagent into the MTU 160, the pipette unit 480 is moved to a rinse basin (described below) on the processing deck 200, and pipette unit 480 is washed by running distilled water through probe 481. The distilled water is pumped from bottle 1140 in the lower chassis 1100, and the purge water is collected in a liquid waste container 1128 in the lower chassis 1100.

After mixing the contents of the MTU 160, a layer of silicon oil is dispensed into each receptacle vessel through the dispenser nozzles 583. The layer of oil, pumped from bottles 1168 in the lower chassis 1100, helps prevent evaporation and splashing of the fluid contents of the MTU 160 during subsequent manipulation and incubation of the MTU 160 and its contents.

REAGENT COOLING BAY

The reagent cooling bay 900 will now be described.

Referring to FIGURES 35-39, the reagent cooling bay 900 includes an insulating jacket 902 fitted around a cylindrical housing 904, preferably made from aluminum. A cover 906, preferably made of Delrin, sits atop housing 904 with a registration tab 905 of cover 906 fitting within slot 907 in housing 904 to ensure proper orientation of the cover 906 An optical sensor may be provided proximate to or within slot 907 for verifying that tab 905 is seated within slot 907. Alternatively, an optical sensor assembly 909 can be secured to an edge of an upper rim of